

Watson Institute Social Center for Academic Achievement

Sharpsburg, Pennsylvania

Children with highly specialized needs thrive in a special education school using a flexible in-person blended learning model incorporating Stride teachers and powered by Stride Learning Solutions online curriculum

Located in western Pennsylvania the Watson Institute is an educational organization made up of special education schools, programs, and resources for children with special needs and their families. It provides education and outpatient behavioral health services for children and adolescents up to the age of 21. Watson has become a valuable partner for local public schools that do not have the resources to fully support students with extreme special needs. Whether it's an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis, neurological impairment, or another serious emotional challenge, Watson is on a mission to help students reach their fullest potential in all aspects of their lives. Through their network of four unique schools, they offer a variety of special education resources and have a dedicated staff consisting of teachers, therapists, and other professionals and pre-professionals that specialize in working with their unique student populations. Watson often serves as the Least Restrictive Environment¹ (LRE) for their students and is a treasured educational asset for families and educators in their area.

The Watson Institute Social Center for Academic Achievement (WISCA), one of the Watson Institute schools, is housed in a 50,000 square foot state of the art school building. This facility is a key contribution to the growing revitalization of one of Pittsburgh's most vibrant neighborhoods. WISCA is a private elementary, middle, and high school for students ages 5–21 and includes mental health services for students who need them. WISCA is licensed by the Pennsylvania Departments of Education and Welfare and its team is widely recognized for its expertise in special education and mental health.

SCHOOL

Type of school:
Private special education school

Grades:
K–12

Ages:
5–21

Program opened:
2010

School Enrollment:
46

Students served:
46

Program staff:
1 Principal
7 WISCA special education teachers

Instructional model:
Individual station rotation blended learning



PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

The Watson Institute Social Center for Academic Achievement is designed to meet the needs of children and adolescents with High Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder.

WISCA students require therapeutic intervention and supports that are not delivered in a traditional educational setting.

WISCA uses Stride Learning Solutions core curriculum, Stride teachers, Stride Learning Solutions premier electives, and Stride Career Prep curriculum.

With Stride teachers and Stride online curriculum providing core instruction, WISCA's staff can focus its attention on meeting the unique social and emotional needs of their students.

Students are grouped in classes of no more than eight to ensure students receive the right level of individual attention needed to meet their academic, social, and emotional goals

Students receive highly specialized instructional services with a ratio of at least one staff member for every four students, assuring each child receives the tailored attention needed to reduce frustration and foster success. WISCA emphasizes research-based standards in reading, writing, and math instruction that encourage children to see themselves as capable and creative. WISCA relies on curriculum and instructional staff from Stride Learning Solutions to deliver academic content in a self-paced blended format. In addition to academic skills taught through the Stride curriculum, WISCA also includes opportunities for artistic success through art and music classes.

Blended Learning Model – A Perfect Fit

WISCA utilizes a fully in-person, individualized, self-paced rotation blended learning model, with students placed in classes of no more than eight students. Each classroom is staffed with one special education teacher and at least one assistant teacher. Students have their own private, personalized cubicle workstation with a desktop computer. As students progress, they are given the opportunity to earn laptop privileges, which allow them to study in more casual learning spaces that may be better suited for their sensory learning needs.



Students receive therapeutic support from certified professionals in a one-on-one format for a minimum of 30 minutes a week. Class therapy sessions are held at least twice a week, usually 30 minutes in length. Lastly, therapists are available for students on an as-needed basis. WISCA teachers are specially trained to help students with emotional needs but having regular access to certified therapists provides WISCA students with an additional set of advocates ready to help them prepare for life after high school.

In addition to having their core academic and social/emotional needs met at WISCA, students also have opportunities to learn art and music throughout their week. Research has shown that learning art and music improves recall and retention of verbal information, helps to advance math achievement, and boosts reading and English language arts skills. The WISCA team has partnered with Stride to build a comprehensive program that gives students the best opportunity for success after high school.

A Typical Daily Schedule

Class assignments and schedules are determined by grade level bands. The day begins at 9:15 a.m. and concludes at 2:15 p.m.; high school students stay for an additional 25 minutes to wrap up work and have a social break. For middle and high school students, WISCA teachers create a daily visual schedule for each student, listing current Stride Learning Solutions lessons as well as their non-academic lessons and supports for the day. Students are encouraged to complete at least four Stride Learning Solutions lessons a day. Elementary school teachers personally guide their students through their daily activities.

Middle school students usually work on online lessons five times each day, with some flexibility in choosing desired courses (see schedule for middle and high school students in table below). Short curriculum sessions of 20 to 40 minutes each help students focus without getting burned out. WISCA utilizes best-practices by ensuring that students get breaks throughout the day. The schedule for high school students is largely the same as consistency helps students feel more comfortable with their learning. Regular adjustments are made as needed to schedule in physical education, art, music, and individual therapy.

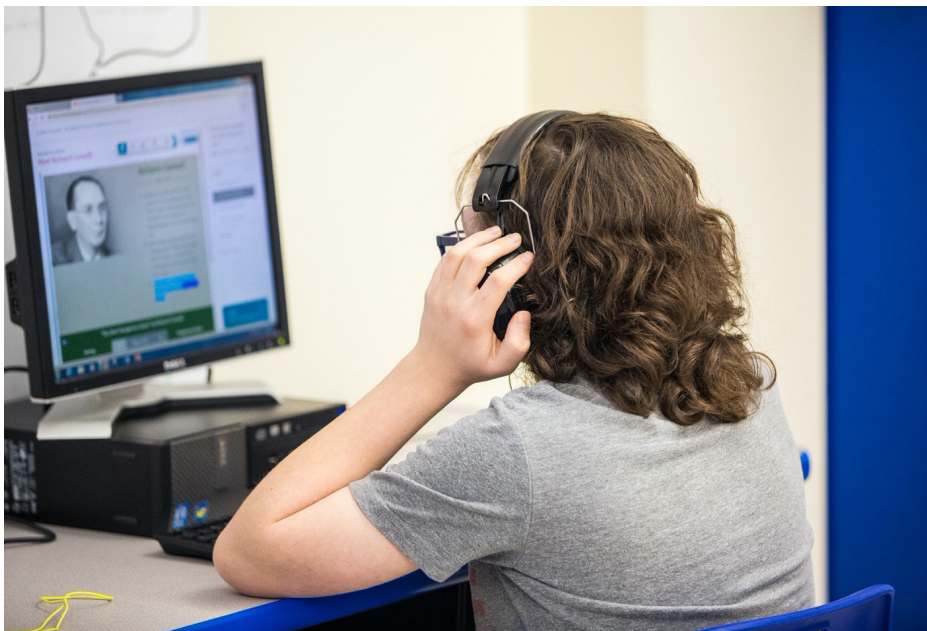
Typical daily schedule for middle school and high school students

Middle school		High school		
Arrival		Students arrive, choose lunch, discuss previous evening with peers and staff.		
Morning meeting	15 min	Watch student news, discuss classroom schedules, and check in (How are you feeling? What is your goal for the day? Who can help you?).		
Online curriculum	20 min	In private workstations, work on Stride Learning Solutions curriculum with Stride teachers.		
Gym	30 min	Work on building healthy habits based on individual abilities and goals.	Break & teachers (20 min)	Work with WISCA teachers and take a social/sensory break.
Online Curriculum	40 min	In private workstations, work on Stride Learning Solutions curriculum with Stride teachers.		
Break & teachers	20 min	Work with WISCA teachers/staff and take a social/sensory break to walk, read, play games, etc.		
Online Curriculum	40 min	In private workstations, work on Stride Learning Solutions curriculum with Stride teachers.	Social skills group (30 min)	Mental health therapist leads discussion on social and emotional skills
LUNCH	40/30* min	Eat lunch in the classrooms and socialize. Upper class students can request school appropriate music or videos		
Online Curriculum	40 min	In private workstations, work on Stride Learning Solutions curriculum with Stride teachers.		
Break & teachers	20 min	Work with WISCA teachers/staff and take a social/sensory break to walk, read, play games, etc.		
Online Curriculum	35 min	In private workstations, work on Stride Learning Solutions curriculum with Stride teachers.		

*Lunch for middle school students is 10 minutes longer.

Why Stride Learning Solutions?

With the school's highly structured in-person blended model designed for students with intense social and emotional needs, WISCA needed a provider that could truly partner with them to meet the diverse academic needs of their students. Many of the students at WISCA are academically high performers, but their unique needs make a traditional school environment too challenging. Since the staff at WISCA are specialists in working with students on the autism spectrum, they needed an online curriculum and platform provider who had highly qualified teachers in all academic areas. Stride teachers are experts in their content areas and WISCA teachers are experts in working with students with intense emotional and behavioral needs. That is what makes Stride the perfect partner for WISCA. Jennifer Dixon-Wagner, Teacher Coach, explained, "The Stride Learning



Solutions curriculum is helpful because our students are all working at different levels. At Watson, no two students are in the same curriculum at the same time or completing their coursework at the same pace. Using Stride Learning Solutions curriculum and Stride teachers gives our teachers the time they need to do so much more than just deliver content in the classrooms.”

Stride Learning Solutions curriculum allows students to advance at their own pace, which is especially important for the students at WISCA. One can't predict when a student on the autism spectrum may have an off day. With Stride, students don't fall behind just because they have other needs that must be addressed on a given day. Students can pause their academic learning to have their social and emotional needs met without falling behind in their coursework. Stride courses and teachers are waiting for them to continue where they left off when they are

ready. WISCA teachers can support students with their needs on Maslow's hierarchy and, when they are ready to pick back up academically, Stride is there to support them through Bloom's taxonomy. Marcia Laus, WISCA Program Coordinator, noted, “Our Watson teachers are the bridge between Stride, students, and curriculum.”

Students at WISCA begin working in Stride courses at the 4th grade level. In addition to the Stride core curriculum for students from grades 4 through 12, WISCA uses Stride premier electives and Stride Career Prep curriculum. These curriculum options allow students to explore a variety of compelling electives to help them discover their passions and prepare them for transition to adulthood and the workplace. WISCA staff understands the value of helping students find their passions so that they are more college- or career-ready when they graduate.

WISCA and Stride Teachers — A Winning Team

Due to the small class sizes and intense personal learning focus, being a new teacher at WISCA requires a lot of training and adjusting from a more traditional educational model. Stride Learning Solutions allows WISCA teachers to be more fluid in their roles in the classroom. Since most WISCA teachers are experts in special education and not in specific content areas, relying on Stride teachers for content expertise allows WISCA to hire, train, and retain some of the best special education staff available.

As students move into higher level content (e.g., Chemistry, Calculus, etc.), it becomes more difficult for WISCA teachers to build on the content that students are seeing in their online classes. Knowing that Stride teachers are experts in these areas helps to forge a strong partnership between students, local in-person teachers, and Stride's online teachers. It's impossible for a single special education teacher with eight students taking different courses in four main subject areas plus electives to meet each student's academic needs and be an expert in all the different fields. Without Stride Learning Solutions digital curriculum and Stride teachers, WISCA would not be able to provide the level of personalized attention that each student does and should receive. This personalized attention is essential for meeting the student's social and emotional needs. “Online instructors at Stride are wonderful about getting back to us and communicating,” notes Dixon-Wagner.

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Measuring Success and Impact at WISCA

The WISCA staff agree that hands down, the ability for WISCA teachers to adjust pace for students is the most positive impact from their partnership with Stride. Marcia Laus, Program Coordinator, describes this aspect as critical for their students. Dixon-Wagner said, "If a student can't do their work today, they are not going to miss out on their learning. A bad day doesn't set them behind with Stride curriculum. Their learning will still be there waiting for them when they are ready tomorrow."

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Leaders at WISCA also appreciate the wide variety of classes that are available for students through the Stride Learning Solutions catalog. With only a small staff, WISCA can offer a comprehensive course catalog rivaling a full traditional school curriculum. WISCA students have the benefit of controlling the pace of their learning and have choices in what they are studying. Choice is a powerful motivator for student learning.

At WISCA success is measured one student at a time. For many students, success means earning their high school diploma. Most students are still enrolled in their local brick-and-mortar school, which placed them at WISCA as their LRE. This means that students will graduate from their local school and earn the same high school diploma as their nondisabled peers. For some students, success may mean finishing all curriculum and going to college. Students also have the option for dual enrollment with a college. "Success is students having a really strong plan for what is coming next when they leave us," said Laus.

Endnotes

¹ Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) is the requirement in federal law under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that students with disabilities receive their education, to the maximum extent appropriate, with nondisabled peers and that special education students are not removed from regular classes unless, even with supplemental aids and services, education in regular classes cannot be achieved satisfactorily.